DOCUMENT RESUME

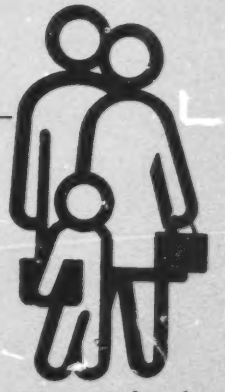
ED 106 901 88 EA 007 045

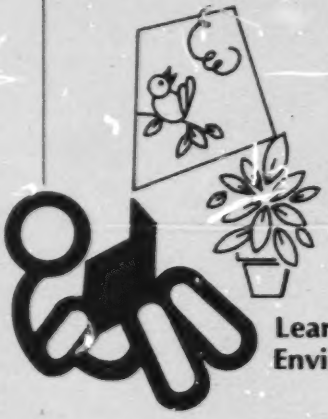
TITLE	Organization and Curriculum: Project LEM.
INSTITUTION	Hackensack Public Schools, N.J.
SPONS AGENCY	Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education (DHEW/OE), Washington, D.C.; New Jersey State Dept. of Education, Trenton.
PUB DATE	73
NOTE	9p.; Related documents are EA 007 046-047; Photographs may reproduce poorly
AVAILABLE FROM	Project LEM, Hackensack Public Schools, Hackensack, New Jersey 07601 (Free; Additional charge for quantity orders)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.76 HC Not Available from EDRS. PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	Age Grade Placement; Curriculum Planning; *Differentiated Staffs; *Educational Innovation; Elementary Education; *Experimental Programs; *Individualized Instruction; *Open Education; Open Plan Schools; Scheduling; School Organization
IDENTIFIERS	Elementary Secondary Education Act Title III; ESEA Title III; Hackensack; New Jersey; *Project LEM

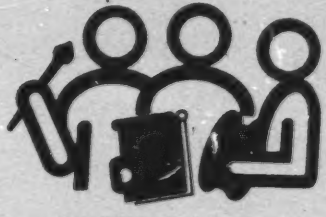
ABSTRACT

This booklet describes the basic curriculum design and staff organization of Project LEM, an experimental open education program at Hillers Elementary School in Hackensack, New Jersey. The LEM open education plan is characterized by differentiated staffing, multiage and multiethnic groupings, personalized instruction, a structured schedule, a core curriculum, and flexible use of space. Each LEM unit contains 100-150 children grouped on a multiage (two-year range) basis and operates with a staff of one team leader, one teacher per 26 students, and one aide. This is the same teacher-pupil ratio as for traditional classes in the school. In addition to basic skills instruction, each team teacher selects one area in either social studies, science, or cultural art to pursue in depth. Each child is assigned to a "home base" for a brief daily orientation and to specific groups for reading, language arts, and mathematics instruction on the basis of his or her skills achievement level. (Author/JG)

LEM...
an educational
program
designed for
open space schools







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Project LEM

Organization and Curriculum

Hackensack Public Schools
Hackensack, New Jersey

Carl E. Padavano, *Superintendent*
Bernard P. Kaminsky, *Principal*
Eleanor Russo, *Project Director*

INTRODUCTION

Implementing an open education plan is not so simplistic that knocking down walls will assure success. Such success is related not only to physical considerations, but also to the impact the use of that space has on the people directly involved, and the freedom it permits for putting new methods into practice. LEM, indeed, did knock down walls to rearrange existing space and revitalize existing school facilities.* More importantly, the LEM process focused upon the essential components which, when combined, enabled the project to achieve the goals associated with open education and to realize the needs of the educational program it sought to put into effect.**

The most important ingredient is the ability of teachers, administrators, parents and children to work in harmony, each contributing ideas and effort, each keeping in mind the goals of education, and each respecting the dignity of the others. This is what forms the basis for the success of the open school approach.

Before Project LEM was even proposed, study group meetings of school staff were held to ascertain the educational needs of the school, clarify the objectives of the program, and determine how these goals could be accomplished. General staff meetings were held to summarize this needs assessment and to allow further interchange of ideas including the self-evaluation of actual classroom practices compared to educational philosphy. It was from these discussions that the staffing pattern of LEM emerged. LEM's teaching teams were so planned that within each team there would be a good balance of teachers with special interests in all areas of curriculum.

This folder attempts to describe the structure in which the staff of Project LEM operates, relative to each other, and to the learning process and curriculum.

ORGANIZATION

LEM's philosophy is that a school's organization should obtain the fullest benefits from the time and talent of the staff and be geared toward improving the quality of teaching and learning. It recognizes that an effective program must include the role of teacher as one who not only presents or instructs, but also, one who establishes and provides learning activities and becomes involved in them.

In serving the needs of between 100-150 children grouped on a multi-age basis, *each LEM unit* operates with a realistic staffing pattern of one team leader, one teacher-per-26-students, and one aide.

LEM's differentiated staffing recognizes the diversity of teaching tasks and talents by assigning different areas of curriculum to different teachers and utilizes paraprofessionals to relieve teachers of non-teaching duties. The abilities of the staff are maximized by direct assignment to activities related to their specific strengths.

The team-teaching approach of LEM is designed so that each teacher prepares lessons only for one level in basic skills, though there may be as many as three sub-groupings within that level. The teachers can provide immediate and direct instruction because they are relating to a more closely defined need as their instructional responsibility. Basic skills instruction occurs simultaneously throughout the LEM area, thereby all children are being served concurrently.

In addition to basic skills instruction, each Team Teacher selects one area in either social studies, science, or cultural arts to pursue in depth and assumes responsibility for its program. This way, each teacher takes the initiative in the area of his or her interest and teaching strength.

THE EDUCATIONAL COMPONENTS OF LEM

The open education plan of LEM is characterized by differentiated staffing, multi-age multi-ethnic groupings, personalized instruction, a structured schedule, the employment of a "core" curriculum, and a flexible use of space. These educational components and their attendant advantages are designed to meet specific goals, namely:

For the individual child . . .

- Improved social competence and a more positive self-image
- An improved basic skills level in Math and Language Arts

For the teachers . . .

- Increased competence in diagnosing pupil needs
- Increased awareness to provide for individual differences
- Increased ability to create a self-supportive learning environment
- Direct experience in cooperative planning

THE DECISION TO SHARE RESPONSIBILITY

To share responsibility for working in a manner that would prevent failure in both academic and social areas, and at the same time, improve the opportunities for children to explore new learning experiences — these are the initial postulates of LEM. In order to develop academic skills, children are re-grouped based on their learning styles and their levels of achievement for basic skills instruction. In order to develop social competence, children are grouped basically in heterogeneous multi-age groups and an informal atmosphere is encouraged. Having done this, teachers are given the responsibility of providing appropriate materials and for creating the learning environment. The LEM staff is convinced that the best results are derived when teachers and children work and plan together. In such a framework, teachers can provide more input; the children can communicate more appropriately.

All the LEM teachers have been volunteers. The seven staff members of the initial LEM are still part of the program, three having become team leaders. For the subsequent LEMs ten additional teachers requested positions in the project.

* See folder on LEM: ENVIRONMENT AND SPACE UTILIZATION

** See folder on LEM: OVERVIEW AND EVALUATION

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RESPONSIBILITIES OF STAFF MEMBERS

Team Leader: In LEM, the Team Leader is a career teacher — plus. Assigned a group in the reading, language arts and math areas, the Team Leader spends approximately one-half of each day teaching, and in addition, assumes the responsibility of the LEM unit functioning successfully. The Team Leader has primary responsibility for identifying pupil needs; assigning pupils to groups; for continual review and development of the curriculum along with the LEM staff; and for demonstrating techniques and use of materials to the staff teachers and aides.

When not scheduled in direct teaching, the Team Leader plans and coordinates the efficient use of materials and resources and acts as liaison between the unit staff and the principal, consultants, parents and others. The Team Leader is also directly involved in large group experiences when all the children are brought together to discuss coming events, talk about areas of concern or topics of interest, or to present culminating activities. In consideration of increased responsibilities, Team Leaders receive extra compensation.

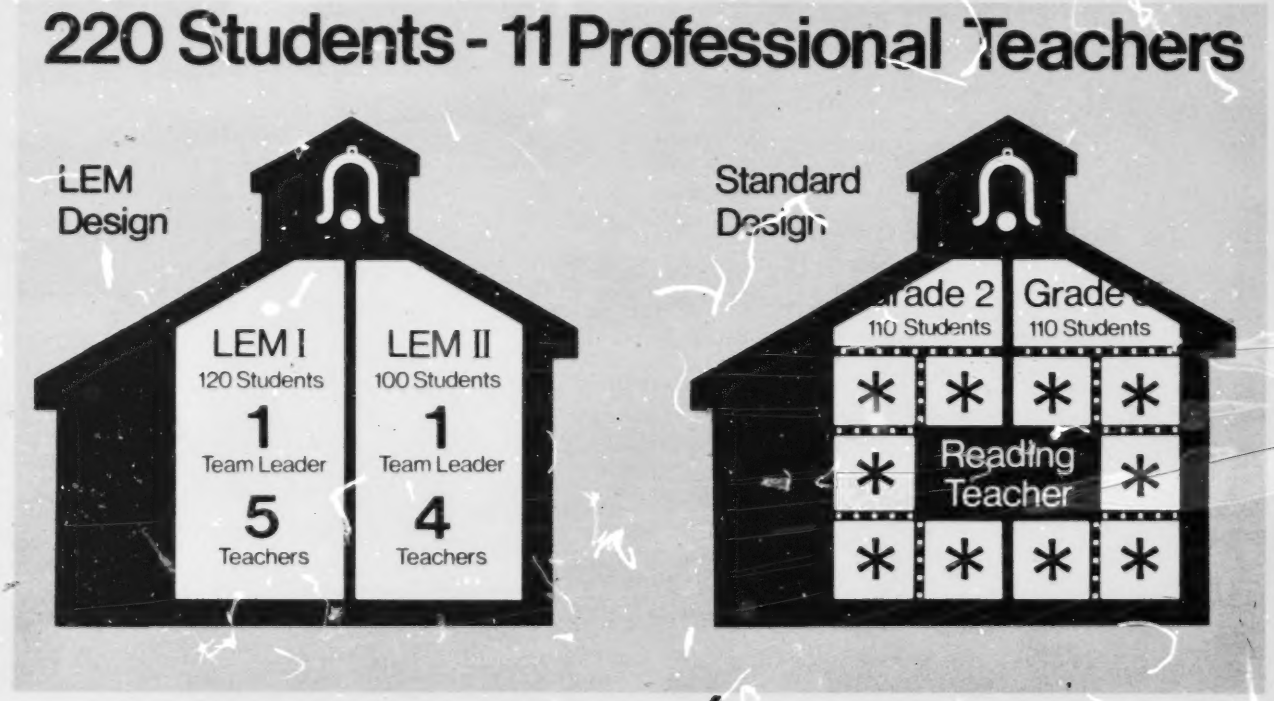
Team Teacher: The position of teacher on the LEM team carries with it the same status and responsibility commonly associated with the position of teacher in the self-contained or standard classroom. Each Team Teacher is responsible for working with the team leader in assuring the educational progress of assigned children both in academic and social areas. Each teacher is also expected to develop competency in diagnosing pupil needs and in providing a continuum of appropriate learning experiences. Similarly, each is expected to share the concern of determining what approach and which material best meets the need of each child.

Paraprofessional: The main responsibilities of the aides are twofold: to assist teachers in non-instructional tasks, including the proper operation of equipment, and to be concerned with the safety and welfare of the children. Time-saving tasks would include setting up equipment, arranging furniture, keeping supplies in their proper place, distributing milk and cookies, performing clerical tasks, such as checking and filing students' work, duplicating materials, and collecting milk money.

Substitute Teachers: Each staff member is required to provide a "substitute kit" providing information to help make any substitute's work successful. The intent is to work with specific substitutes so that they may become familiar with the LEM style and its staff members. Specific instructions are always provided by the team leader. If the team leader is absent, one of the regular team teachers, previously designated as support teacher, assumes the role of team leader and a substitute teacher is called upon to substitute for the support teacher.

NOT NECESSARILY AN INCREASE IN STAFF

Project LEM demonstrates the fact that such a staff reorganization can be achieved without, necessarily, incurring additional costs for added professional staff. LEM operates within the traditional teacher/pupil ratio. This might be seen more evidently by comparing the structure of LEM I and LEM II to that of the traditional staffing pattern as shown here.



SELECTING THE CHILDREN

Selection the youngsters who were to experience the LEM open plan approach initially was done by random sampling from grades 2 and 3. This resulted in half the children beinggin LEM and the other half continuing in the standard classroom. In addition, all non-English speaking youngsters were assigned to LEM. In subsequent years, increased facilities permitted all remaining second and third graders to be included in the program, and then the fourth and fifth grades as well.

GROUPING THE CHILDREN — TWO WAYS

First, to provide flexible instruction in content areas, multi-age (2-year range) heterogeneous groupings were formed for "home base" assignments. Each child was assigned a home base teacher to whom the child reports each morning for a brief orientation. During the week this same multi-age, multi-ethnic group of youngsters participates, as a group, in Social Studies, Science, Cultural Arts, Music, Physical Ed. and Art.

Second, to provide appropriate groupings for instruction in basic skills, children were assigned on the basis of their skills achievement levels to specific groups for Reading, Language Arts and Math.

Initial placement in skills groups was based on a review of each student's performance on the California Achievement Test, the Gates MacGinite Reading Test, together with the staff's evaluation of the individual student's needs. In addition, the SRA Phonics Survey and an informal reading inventory was administered to each pupil at the beginning of the school year. Reassignment of individual students is made throughout the year based on results of teacher observations and standardized and teacher-made tests.

Common in both skills and content grouping is the concern for the social interaction and affective development of each child.

A TEACHER-LEARNER APPROACH IN LEM

Educators concur: children are different. Why then set a common goal for everyone . . . assign the same lesson for all . . . or even use the same book? These are not rhetorical questions to the staff of LEM who are convinced of the importance of personalized learning. They know that the differences among children necessitate a revision of former educational approaches. Thus, in LEM, grade-level standards are not the major objective. Rather, the optimum development of the individual pupil becomes the goal. The combination of differentiated staffing and multi-age groupings permits an individualized learning process for all students; while the team-teaching approach fosters flexible groupings, with more time devoted to each child.

There are three basic forms of instruction in LEM and the teachers use whichever approach is most appropriate to the needs of the program:

LARGE GROUP INSTRUCTION — where the children are brought together, usually seated in a large, informal circle, to talk about coming events, to discuss areas of concern or topics of interest, to introduce themes for instruction and to participate in culminating activities.

SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION — where the teacher plans and conducts activities, both for developing basic skills and social interests, appropriate for work at group tables or in informal clusters.

PERSONALIZED INSTRUCTION — where the teachers provide individual "contracts" for students, assistance with projects, consultations, and tutorial or peer teaching.

THE CONSPICUOUS DIFFERENCE . . . a sense of sharing

"That's the whole thing in LEM — a sharing," said one of the teachers. "We're one unit, rather than just five different people. That's what we try to develop with the children, too."

The sharing among the staff of LEM is conspicuous even to the casual visitor. The children learn much by observing the manner in which teachers and parents cooperate. To LEM Project Director, Eleanor Russo, it is not that surprising:

> "When you remove the teacher's desk, when teachers empty out the treasures of their closets and when all is held in common, a unifying force permeates the scene," she explained. "Your personal sphere becomes less a concern than the fact that you might have something someone else could use."

Teachers share their resources . . . files they've built up over the years . . . materials they've personally developed. All are consolidated in a central file. Suggestions get passed along. Ideas are exchanged. Pooling such experience, combining so much material, sharing such feelings enable teachers just naturally to extract something that's bound to help children. And the open sense of sharing among the adults becomes a model for the youngsters as well.

One of the staff, who readily admits to early reservations about the LEM approach, now sees it as a very positive step toward improving education. The teacher based this evaluation on how he has seen a number of students who previously were having behavioral problems — difficulties mixing or socializing with others — acclimate themselves more easily in LEM. "Individuals who ordinarily would require supplemental help often don't require it in LEM," he explained. "The teachers and the team approach seem capable of filling the gap which such youngsters often previously experienced."

Bernard Kaminsky, the Principal, summed it up in the belief that the teachers, parents, and children, alike, appreciate the message that LEM transmits and that message is: "You're important. You are learning and helping others to learn."

SCHEDULING

A major feature of LEM is the structure employed in both scheduling and grouping procedures. In LEM the "exploring" of new interests and challenges in encouraged in a non-threatening and supportive manner.

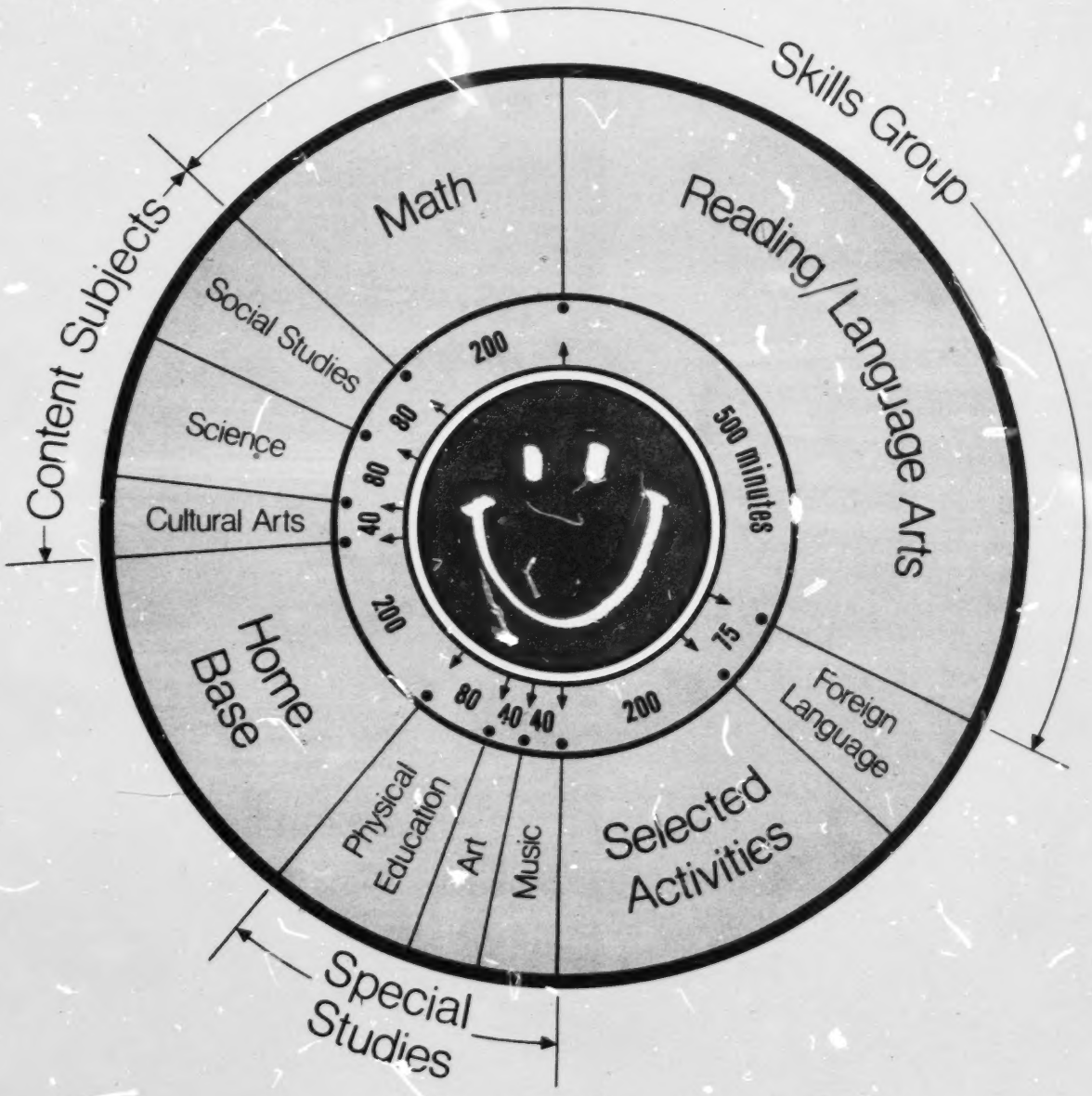
The intent is to design the schedule so that each child, each day, gets to participate in each of the basic academic areas — reading, language arts, and math. In each of these basic skills areas, all groups are conducted at the same time. The content area subjects — social studies, science, and cultural arts — are scheduled simultaneously, but the children rotate, participating in a different subject area each day.

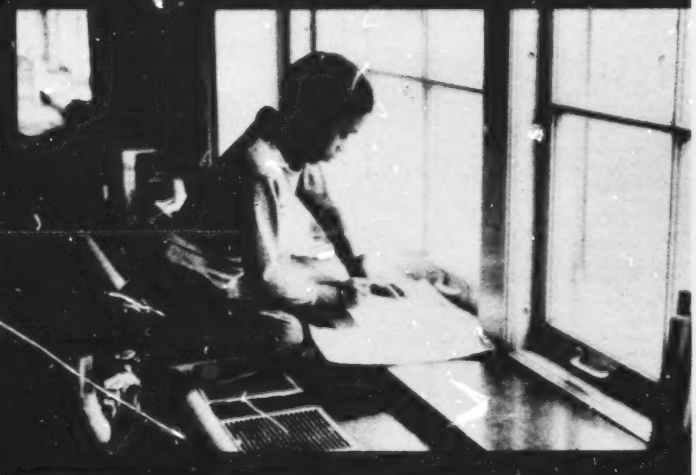
The Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) program provides 15 minutes of aural-oral instruction in Spanish every day for each child in grades 3-5.

Art, music, and physical education are scheduled concurrently and groups are formed based on home base groupings. Scheduling these subjects simultaneously attempts to provide planning time for the LEM teams within the school day.

One member of the staff, comparing the LEM to her earlier experience in an experimental program in another city, commented: "The LEM's more organized. The equipment's more centrally located. But the biggest difference is that there's so much more group planning and, as a result, the children are enjoying success."

Typical scheduling pattern of a fourth and fifth grade child's week in the LEM.





OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

PLANNING Each teacher maintains a daily record of his or her own plans and on a monthly basis, submits to the principal a report identifying areas of progress and concern.

FORMAL ACHIEVEMENT TESTING This program includes the administration and assessment of standardized tests based on city-wide plans.

INFORMAL TESTING This consists of teacher-designed and commercially prepared criterion reference testing administered on an on-going basis, and pre- and post testing for units of study and skills attainment.

THE LIBRARY The library is utilized on both a formal and informal basis. Each week a library class is scheduled as part of the language arts — reading program. Open library is available for research and study with a specified time of the day allocated to each of the LEM units.

SPECIAL ACTIVITIES The schedule allows time for the children to participate in special activities related to their own interests and coordinated to the total curriculum. When working on a theme, children select related topics that appeal to them and have the opportunity to participate in appropriate "hands on" activities.

RECORD KEEPING A record keeping system is maintained to reflect the progress of each pupil. It shows the stated objectives per level, related testing results, and pupil skills attainment.

EVALUATION For those objectives based on specific attainments in Math and Reading both formal and informal tests are administered on a pre- and post and interim test basis. Together they constitute an evaluation procedure for monitoring the success and needs of each child.

Many of the objectives of LEM focus on behavioral changes. Daily observation of the children's behavior by school personnel, visitors and parents alike, provide evidence that these objectives are being met. An attempt to document such observations was made by utilizing a locally designed Student Attitude Inventory and through staff evaluation of student participation in varied activities.

REPORTING TO PARENTS

The importance of keeping parents informed of their child's progress is a feature of LEM. The basic concern is with helping to foster the child's learning skills and enthusiasm for learning. Rather than grades, there is a form called a Pupil Evaluation Card that combines a checklist and narrative approach. It is used as a tool of communication . . . between teacher and pupil . . . pupil and parent . . . parent and teacher. Sent home to parents three times a year, it shows their child's progress in a personalized non-ranking manner. In addition, two parent conferences are held during the year, one of which may be in the form of a home visitation by one of the LEM staff.

CURRICULUM

Educators — researchers and practitioners alike — are in agreement that limiting a child's education to a sequential, information-centered curriculum is inappropriate to the type of person needed in the emerging cybernetic society. The conviction exists that school curricula should be designed to teach the student the reasoning, exploring and discovering process. It's a conviction that is shared by the staff of Project LEM. Therefore, it was appropriate that LEM employ an active and personalized approach to all aspects of the curriculum.

Central themes are often employed as a "core" for developing an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum content. Units of study in the areas of social studies, science, and cultural arts are designed on a two-year basis to relate to the multi-age groupings. Basic skills instruction is planned for sequential skills attainment regardless of age.

STAFF WORKSHOPS

A significant portion of the teacher workshop each summer is devoted to the why, how and wherefore of program design, assignment of teacher responsibilities, and attitude formation. The following are its goals:

1. Acquire background in current research and educational philosophy.
2. Identify components of the reading and math disciplines.
3. Learn specific skills in the teaching of reading and math as related to content areas.
4. Examine diagnostic materials and procedures used for assessment of reading and math skills.
5. Explore, assess, and select available commercial materials.
6. Prepare prescriptive packets designed to develop specific components of the reading and math disciplines.
7. Become familiar with available human and material resources.
8. Assess teachers' strengths and interest for the purpose of selecting teacher responsibilities.
9. Plan and schedule mechanical aspects of the daily program.
10. Explore teaching and grouping techniques needed to conduct individual, small and large group lessons.
11. Develop a pupil interest inventory to aid in selection of themes.
12. Plan and schedule content areas based on core curriculum as an on-going phase of the program.

The plans formulated during the summer workshop are implemented during the school year. Weekly planning time for team members is used to evaluate progress of the program, to decide how to adjust to current situations and to plan and schedule future activities.

USE OF MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT

A teacher resource file is located in the teachers' study room in each LEM. It offers a compilation of both purchased and teacher-made materials . . . ditto sheets . . . booklets . . . tests . . . filed according to skills and topics.

Materials such as learning kits, transparencies, film loops, cassettes, and their related hardware are also housed in this central location. Its availability, and the time-saving help of the aide, encourage the LEM staff to use all materials. Through the sharing process of the team-teaching approach there is less need for extensive hardware or software, as greater use is made of the available equipment.

MULTI-TEXT APPROACH

Convinced that the abilities, interests and learning styles of students cannot be fully served if only a single type of material is presented, the LEM staff employs several different textbooks in each subject area along with a full range of multi-media resources.

In the content areas, the accent is on the teaching of concepts. Seeing to it that the seeds of critical thinking are planted in these young minds, to be nutured by their development of inquiry skills, is a major concern of the LEM staff.

In the basic skills areas, teacher manuals serve as instructional guides but these are supplemented by many other tools. Implementation of the curriculum is achieved not only through the use of basic texts, but also through *individualized materials*. The staff develops "packets" for individual pupils to complete, designed to help them gain specific skills. Individual "contracts" — involving appropriate and challenging tasks for the youngster to fulfill — are designed to strengthen a detected weakness or spur on a special interest that reveals itself. The use of programmed learning kits and booklets, and exploratory "hands on" activities are two other means of meeting instructional objectives. Included in such activities might be: building a model house to scale . . . plotting charts and graphs which depict student preference or reactions . . . creating and performing a play . . . writing a news story . . . designing and setting up an informational bulletin board . . . or writing down original thoughts on chalkboards designated for just such a purpose.

SPECIAL SUBJECTS

Education specialists conduct their art, music and physical education segments of the curriculum in specified areas of the building outside the LEM. Although the special subjects follow a set design, the frequent dialogue between specialists and the LEM staff often results in integrating these special subjects into the curriculum being offered in the LEM.

SPECIAL ACTIVITIES

The special activities of each LEM are determined at group meetings where both teachers and students have the opportunity to express their preferences. Each teacher develops one or two of these proposed activities in depth, and then the children select which one they want to pursue. Time is provided within the daily schedule for the youngsters to engage in the activities they've chosen.

Such project activities encourage conversation, peer teaching and group feelings which are three different aspects of the same basic goal, namely, increasing the social competencies of the children.

RELATED ACTIVITIES

In the open atmosphere of the LEM even the units of study can easily stretch beyond the walls of the individual learning center and encourage children's participation in other exciting forms of shared learning. Such activities, which enrich the program while providing direct knowledge, would include field trips . . . stage performances both on the mini-stage in each LEM and in the school auditorium . . . writing a newsletter and sharing it with other children in the building . . . "hands on" activities which could take place in the workshop at the local high school, the TV station, the printing shop, or in a local store. Community people are often "tapped" to share their expertise with the youngsters. In brief, all resources, both human and material, are utilized for the benefit of the children.

Project LEM, Learning Experience Module
Hackensack, New Jersey

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The materials presented herein were prepared pursuant to a Grant from the New Jersey State Department of Education under provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Title III. However, the agency expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the New Jersey State Department of Education or the United States Office of Education.

ESEA III